

Maximizing Your Life Portion
Week #6 - The Parable of the
Unjust Manager
Luke 16:1-13

Today we're going to tackle one of the most puzzling teachings Jesus ever taught. It's the Parable of the Unjust Steward.

Bible scholars can't agree on how to interpret this parable. And if we don't know how to interpret it, how can we apply it to our lives?

So let's jump right in and see what's going on.

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Luke 16:1-8

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Now, when the manager loses his job, he will also lose his home. Presumably he is one of the hired servants living in the rich man's home.

So what does he do? He tells his master's debtors to change the terms of their bills in a way that is beneficial to the debtors.

The 1st owed 10 measures (about 750 gallons) of olive oil. You can get a gallon of olive oil shipped to your home today for about \$47. This means the first debtor owed the rich man around \$35,000. The servant said, "Quick, change the bill to say you owe \$17,500."

The 2nd debtor owed 100 measures (about 1100 bushels) of wheat. A bushel of wheat sells for around \$4 today. So the 2nd debtor owed around \$4,400. The servant said, "Quick, change the bill to say you owe \$3,520."

Let's suppose that you owe \$100,000 on your house to the mortgage company. A manager with the mortgage company comes to you and says, "Let's change the terms of the mortgage. You no longer owe \$100,000. Now you owe \$50,000. There's no catch. Your interest rate remains the same."

Do you take the deal? Of course!

You're happy. The manager is happy. Everyone's happy...except the mortgage company. They're losing money!

I'm thinking about sending a copy of this parable to Wells Fargo with my next mortgage payment. Why? Because I am waiting for a manager to follow the example in this parable.

A mortgage manager at Wells Fargo would be fired for cutting in half the balance owed on a mortgage. (All I have to do is find a mortgage manager that is ready to move on to a new career.)

But that's the problem. That's why this parable doesn't make any sense...on the surface.

But the manager in this parable is not fired. In fact, he is praised!

★ v. 8 - "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light."

Biblical scholars have
come up with many
possible solutions:

Some say that the manager gained his master's favor by taking the charges out of his own commission. Or, similarly, that the manager knew that his master was committing fraud, and that he took out the fraudulent charges.

But that's just conjecture. There's no indication of either scenario being true. Verse 5 explicitly says that this money is owed to the master.

Another explanation: That even though the manager lost some money for his master, the master praised him because the debtors would honor the master in public.

So, in effect, the steward shamed his master into being an honorable guy.

But this doesn't hold water. The master wouldn't be happy about this.

Some scholars have pointed out that the manager was not praised for being ethical, but rather shrewd. But there are at least two problems with this explanation:

First, Jesus told another parable about a manager in Luke 12:42 where He used the coupled the same word ("shrewd") with faithfulness. So it would seem that THIS manager would also need to be faithful in order to earn the master's praise.

Second, if the manager was committing fraud, how is this going to get him new employment or a new home? The debtors benefiting from his fraudulent activities would certainly have reason to believe that the manager would one day commit fraud against them.

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Some people—skeptics and atheists usually—point to this parable and say, "See! Jesus isn't perfectly moral. He's commending someone who ripped off his employer!"

Summary: It certainly appears that this manager is acting in a hostile manner toward his master by giving the debtors a reduction in what they owe. If the manager was loyal, he would meticulously collect all of his master's debts, especially if his job and house were on the line. Yet the master praises the servant for being "shrewd" in betraying him.

It's funny how Bible difficulties expose our prejudices. The skeptic looks at a Bible difficulty and finds a reason not to believe. The Christian looks at a Bible difficulty and finds a reason to study deeper. Even if it is out of a desire to prove his already settled belief that his faith in Jesus is right, the end result is admirable: a closer and open-minded examination of the material.

I believe that the two millennia separating us from the time in which this story was told and subsequently written has caused some blanks to appear—not blanks in the text, but blanks in our understanding of the background. These are blanks that we must fill in.

The economy in those days had its foundation in agriculture.

Even today, the 2nd-largest part of the Texas economy is agriculture. Only oil is larger.

Now, in that day, the preferred method of agriculture was tenant farming.

If you owned land, you could make money by renting it out to people who would grow a crop.

If you had enough land, you could have multiple tenants growing multiple crops. You could even be an absentee landowner. You could hire a manager to oversee your affairs.

But this was a risky undertaking. The vast majority of tenants barely managed to make a profit. If the rent was high and the harvest was poor, the tenant might go into debt. He might not even gain enough seed to plant the following year.

So it was not uncommon for tenant farmers to acquire debt and perhaps even default on their loans.

Archaeologists have found tenant contracts from Egypt at this time. Some of them state that all late payments would incur a 50% interest rate.

If a tenant defaulted on a loan or couldn't pay his rent, the landowner had a few options:

- 1 He could expel the tenant farmer from his estate.
- 2 He could confiscate the tenant farmer's property.
- 3 He could have the tenant farmer imprisoned.
- 4 He could force the tenant farmer to become his slave.

A landowner could forgive all or a portion of the rent a tenant farmer would owe in order to enable and encourage debt repayment.

★ But there was one other option, and it was fairly customary in those days: voluntary rent remission.

The lease would remain in effect, and both parties would still have to fulfill their contractual obligations. But the current year's rent—or the current debt from previous years—would be reduced or removed.

There are numerous examples of voluntary rent reduction all throughout the Roman empire—Cicero, Pliny, property owners in Egypt, etc.

Back to the parable

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The parable begins with a manager who has been mismanaging his master's possessions.

The master wanted to see the records.

The manager, knowing that the books would not tell a story favorable to him, was suddenly very eager to implement a plan that would enable him to find a new home.

His plan: voluntary debt remission.

These discounts were within the manager's authority to give. He had the discretion to make these decisions.

The manager gave each debtor a discount, probably based on what each one could repay.

Just like the merchant servants in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), this servant had a great deal of independence. He could freely negotiate and adjust his contracts.

This was a very generous and benevolent action on his part.

So the manager voluntarily lowed the debt

So the manager voluntarily lowed the debt owed by two debtors.

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He could expect to be repaid in the form of hospitality...if he ever found himself in need of it.

What the landowner—and Jesus—commend is this: the forgiveness of debt, generosity, and helping those in need.

This is the appropriate course of action for those who seek to receive mercy in their time of need.

So we have a master who wants to penalize his servant for mismanagement.

And the servant turns around and reduces the debt owed to the manager. And the manager is happy about it? How can this be?

This can only occur if the reduction to the manager's account in actuality supports the manager's interests.

The steward acted wisely, honestly, and faithfully by reducing the debt owed to his master. It enabled the debtors to continue a relationship with the master. In the end, the master benefited.

The steward is the kind of disciple that we should follow.

We should use our life portion—our resources, our money, our wisdom, and our time—to benefit other people.

★ v. 9 - "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings."

How much we have been given is not the issue. How faithful we are with it is.

★ v. 10 - "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little things is unrighteous also in much."

God expects us to be faithful with what we have been given.

★ vv. 11-12 - "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?"

In the end, we have to choose which master we serve.

★ v. 13 - "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

The servant had previously been unjust. He squandered his master's resources. He was about to be in trouble.

The good news for us today is that God has given us a chance to obey.

But he proved himself to be faithful by reducing the debts of those who owed the master. By doing so, the debtors were drawn close to the master, for they understood that the master was merciful.

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Response

Today, perhaps you feel like
one of the debtors.

You owe so much to God, and you can never
repay Him.

But God is a good and benevolent Master. He
gives you mercy freely and without cost. He
forgives you of your debt. He comes close to
you, drawing you to Himself.

Or maybe today you feel like
the unjust servant.

You have blown your opportunity to serve God
faithfully. You know that He will hold you to
account.

God gives you this opportunity today to let His
debtors know that their debt has been paid.
Let others know that their Master is merciful.